

September 8, 2026

Whittier City Council
13230 Penn St.
Whittier, CA. 90602

SUBJECT: Leaked Audio Exposes City Manager “Justifying” \$800,000 for ONE WORD

A leaked audio recording from an invitation-only “Stakeholders” meeting solely with leaders of Whittier’s business associations, held on Aug. 17th, revealed the City Manager admitting it’s going to cost Whittier taxpayers \$800,000 to insert One Word into a new Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP) to allow removal of HEALTHY trees without public recourse. (background in my Aug 25th letter to you, attached).

Cascading repercussions since include:

-- A comprehensive expose by *Whittier Informed* released two hours prior to the start of the last City Council meeting on Aug. 25th;

<https://www.whittierinformed.com/healthy-is-the-word-standing-between-whittiers-trees-and-the-chainsaw/>

--A front page *Whittier Daily News* article on Aug. 27th quoting several Whittier residents who spoke at the Aug. 25th City Council meeting including former State Senator Martha Escutia saying: “I don’t know where in the world has a healthy tree been defined as a danger to society other than here in Whittier. I think that’s just outrageous.” And research specialist James Sass spoke criticizing the language in the contract with Michael Baker, Inc. (MBI) regarding their commitment to frame community survey questions to reach the desired outcome in the UFMP. “In all my years in doing research as a research professional, I’ve never once implemented a survey where the client told me what to find.”

<https://www.whittierdailynews.com/2026/08/27/can-a-healthy-tree-be-a-hazardous-tree-its-at-the-root-of-whittiers-latest-urban-forest-battle/>

MBI has NO experience developing an UFMP, but they were hired by the previous City Council at huge cost to write one to replace sections of Whittier’s Tree Protection Ordinance and Parkway Tree Manual that protected our healthy trees for decades. Other S CA cities chose companies with expertise and experience to prepare their UFMPs. MBI’s contract includes production of an unnecessary Environmental Impact Report (EIR). **NO other S CA cities did an EIR in conjunction with their UFMP.** There is NO need for an EIR unless our city plans to reduce the protections of our urban forest. So why is Whittier doing an EIR? According to the City Manager’s staff report when recommending MBI for the contract, the EIR “provides the City with the most legal protection from a CEQA challenge if a suit is brought against the City.” **Whittier can protect against lawsuits by following the law!**

Speaking of not following the law...Immediately after public comment concluded on Aug. 25th, the City Council and City Manager engaged in 26 minutes of question and answer discussion on the public comments about the UFMP. Their discussion continued even after the City Attorney interrupted, warning them: “The Brown Act authorizes brief comments from the Council after public comments, but because certain items aren’t agendaized, we shouldn’t get into too deep of a conversation into the details. I recommend that we proceed with the items on the agenda.”

MBI certainly has experience doing EIR work. They were hired by Whittier’s previous City Council to write “environmental assessment” reports stating there is NO environmental impact to removing 178 tall, healthy, shady trees at Parnell Park and replacing them with saplings. MBI also compiled an extensive

Mitigated Negative Declaration report saying there would be NO environmental impact to removing our Greenleaf Ave. tree canopy. And MBI authored the memorandum filed with the State claiming that the former City Council's suspension of Whittier's Parkway Tree Manual was exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). That action resulted in the ongoing Conservancy lawsuit.

Several months later, MBI was rewarded with this No-bid contract for an unnecessary EIR and an UFMP totaling \$564,133. Costs include a "community survey" written to skew public opinion toward considering tree protection as a potential threat to public safety, and four community "workshops" to hammer home that message. Comparable California cities to Whittier's population spent about \$150,000 developing a legitimate UFMP to protect their healthy trees with a vision to expand tree planting on publicly-owned land. Other CA cities' UFMPs were funded primarily by CalFire state grants, not an expensive no-bid contract. In addition to MBI's contract, the previous City Council awarded companion no-bid contracts to a law firm to attempt to defend against the Conservancy lawsuit (\$200,000), and to a Public Relations firm to try to "sell" the UFMP to the Community (\$50,000). Together these contracts total over \$800,000, the amount the City Manager said the City was spending to insert One Word into the UFMP.

Community organizations comprising the Organize Whittier coalition are on record supporting Reinstatement of Whittier's Parkway Tree Manual (Organize Whittier letter sent to you in July, attached). Leaders of these organizations recently reached out to their members resulting in a coordinated response to request that you **PAUSE** any further work on the MBI no-bid contract (number A26-004 and Amendment 1 to that contract). That contract was awarded by the previous City Council one month before three of them were landslide defeated on April 14th. A PAUSE will give you time to evaluate and verify the information and concerns being revealed by numerous Whittier residents.

When the previous City Council voted 4-1 last Nov. to "suspend" sections of Whittier's Tree Protection Ordinance and Parkway Tree Manual, council member Mary Ann Pacheco cast the sole vote against the suspension. Thank you! In April, Mayor James Becerra, council member Aida Macedo and council member Vicky Santana were elected pledging support for reinstating our tree protections. Long-time council member Cathy Warner has previously asked for a Pause to allow further study on several Council actions. Putting the MBI contract on **PAUSE** would send a strong signal to the Community that you are listening and acting accordingly.

Sincerely,



Conny McCormack
Founder & Leader, www.saveourtreeswhittier.com
City of Whittier resident for 30 years
Former L.A. Co. Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk (ret.)

cc: Conal McNamara, City Manager
Rigo Garcia, City Clerk

2 attachments